THE ICON THAT ESCAPED THE ICONOCLASM

A modern dispute over a sixth-century icon

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The Richard Temple Gallery lies in what its owner admits is ‘a slightly obscure backwater’ of Holland Park, West London. It is far from the orbit of the art dealers who tread the ‘Golden Mile’ between Sotheby’s and Christie’s in the West End; and even in local terms its footfall does not compare to that of Cath Kidston, the colourful homeware designer a couple of doors down. At present, however, it is very much on the map for two of the greatest cultural institutions in the world, the Louvre and the British Museum. The focus of their interest is one of the most extraordinary sale-room discoveries of modern times: a sixth-century Egyptian icon valued two years ago at £3,000, and now thought to be worth millions.

Surviving as a blackened, tattered piece of linen, the icon is possibly the oldest painting of the Virgin and Child in existence. Which museum it goes to – if either – depends on the outcome of a legal dispute over its export from France, where Richard Temple bought it at a small auction house in Avignon two years ago. Neither institution is keen to be drawn into a public row (the BM refuses to comment, while the Louvre will only say that it is ‘an extremely complex issue’); but the French press is already up in arms. ‘GIVE US BACK OUR ICON,’ shouted a recent headline in the news magazine *Le Point*.

‘For the British Museum to be able to show this picture would be fantastically important,’ says the country’s leading icon expert, Professor Robin Cormack: ‘important both for the public to be able to see such an early painting, and for our understanding of the Eastern Mediterranean world.’ His colleague at the Courtauld Institute Dr Antony Eastmond describes it as ‘the

missing link' in the museum's collection, connecting its ancient Egyptian portraits to its mediaeval icons: 'There's simply nothing in the country that comes close to it, by three or four hundred years on either side.'

For the art historian Sister Wendy Beckett, its value is not only historical, but aesthetic and spiritual. 'It's such a beautiful icon, with Mary's wonderful oval face and column of a neck, and that extraordinary small Jesus: I've never seen a depiction of Christ which was so vital. Icons are prayers, taking us through an image to an awareness of God – and it does that to an extraordinary degree.'

The story of how the icon found its way to Britain is one of luck, highly specialised knowledge, and – on the part of the Louvre – incompetence. To understand it, one must first go back to the days of the Byzantine Empire, and the violent religious dispute from which the word 'iconoclasm' derives.

From the time of the earliest Christian portraits (around the start of the second century), it is likely that some believers condemned them as 'graven images'. Those who favoured icons responded with both practical reasons – they were a useful tool for teaching the illiterate – and theological ones. To say that God could not be depicted as a man, they argued, was to deny the reality of the Incarnation. Besides, it was not the icon itself that was being venerated, but what it represented.

Matters came to a head in the eighth century, when the forces of Islam – which utterly rejected such imagery – made sweeping inroads into the Byzantine Empire. Not only did they destroy the icons they found, but they forced their Christian opponents to question their own position on the subject. In 754, the Emperor Constantine V introduced a ban on religious pictures which lasted for the best part of a century. In the course of the 'Iconoclasm' which it sparked, an untold number of paintings were broken up and burned, and anyone continuing to venerate them was severely persecuted.

‘Certain religious institutions resisted,’ says Richard Temple, ‘and there were scenes of terrible barbarism and cruelty. Constantinople had almost total power over the Christian world, and it did a very thorough job.’ By the time the purge ended in 843, only three places had managed to hold out against it: Rome, where the Pope maintained a degree of independence from the Emperor; the island of Cyprus; and the remote St Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai Desert.

How many icons survive altogether is disputed, since some are in such poor condition that they are omitted from scholarly lists – but it is in the region of twenty. ‘Apart from one at the Louvre, one in the Bode Museum in Berlin, and five in Rome, there are none remaining in the Western world,’ says Richard Temple. ‘For one to come on the open market is unheard-of – and I can’t imagine it happening again in my lifetime.’ Discovering the Virgin and Child is, for him, the crowning achievement of his career: ‘In a way I feel I was *meant* to find it, because I have spent so many years investigating the world from which it comes.’

A slim, ascetic-looking man in his mid-sixties, Temple – the son of a baronet – is an astute but reluctant art dealer. ‘Many dealers could just as well be selling oil futures,’ says his friend Princess Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky, a lecturer in twentieth-century Russian art. ‘They don’t have a visceral feeling for what they handle. But Dick is very deeply interested in religion, and loves his icons. He’d much rather be doing something else which left him free just to enjoy them.’ She compares him to the great travel writer Wilfred Thesiger – ‘He’s sui generis, and although he’s married with children, he’s a loner. He goes off to different monasteries each year to meditate.’

Temple was still a schoolboy when he bought his first icon. ‘I found it in a sort of Old Curiosity Shop off Shaftesbury Avenue,’ he remembers, ‘and it cost me £11, which was all the money I had in the world. I didn’t really

know why it appealed to me – I just liked old things.' Thrilled with his purchase, he took it off to the National Gallery, only to be put down with the words, 'We don't consider this art.' It was the beginning of an enduring struggle with an art-historical establishment which he believes has insufficient respect for spirituality.

Although he never attended university, Temple is a deeply erudite man whose book *Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity* shows an impressive grasp of theology and philosophy. He describes the book as his 'manifesto', encapsulating as it does the great passion of his life – 'the emergence of Christian culture from pagan Hellenistic culture'. It was this passion which enabled him to recognise the Virgin and Child for what it was when he spotted a tiny black-and-white photograph in the *Gazette de L'Hôtel Druôt*, the magazine in which French auction houses announce forthcoming sales. 'It was like seeing the love of your life across the room at a cocktail party,' he said. 'My fingernails started tingling.'

The picture, he read, was to be auctioned at the Jacques Desamais sale-room in Avignon a couple of weeks later, on 29th June 2003. It was described as 'Egyptian, Coptic art, sixth century', and the estimate was 4,500 to 6,000 euros.

The timing could not have been less convenient. June is the month when London art dealers are at their busiest, caught up in the Grosvenor House Fair and their own summer exhibitions. Unable to get away, Temple asked Laurence Morrocco – a restorer specialising in early paintings – to go to the sale preview in his behalf.

Morrocco arrived in Avignon a week before the sale to find it in the grip of a heatwave. 'It must have been 38 degrees,' he says. 'I was having to stop every few yards for a rest. My clothes were drenched in sweat.' The Jacques Desamais sale-room proved to be a 'sleepy kind of place', and Morrocco was

baffled as to how such a potentially valuable piece had ended up there. He could only surmise that the vendors – the heirs of a Russian-born collector called Joseph Jonas – had been badly advised.

What struck him at once was the expression on the Virgin's face. 'It was like a look from another world – an echo from something really unknown. It was haunting: you couldn't help being intrigued by it. I had no doubt about its authenticity; my only concern was about cleaning it. It was very, very dark, and I wasn't sure that it could ever be made to look better.'

For Richard Temple, however, there was another question: had anyone else spotted it?

To an outsider, it seems extraordinary that the appearance of such an ancient icon did not immediately cause a stir across the art world. But, as Temple explains it, the Virgin and Child was so far off most dealers' radar that they had no idea of its significance: 'The people who are seriously interested in icons tend to be academics, who don't think much about the market for them. For the average dealer, an early icon is twelfth-to-fourteenth century. There *are* others who might have identified it as I did, but only one or two.'

Nevertheless, given that it had been correctly dated in the catalogue, he expected it to go for considerably more than the estimate. As a precaution, he secured extra financial backing from one his clients, a collector called Dr Andreas Pittas.

When the day of the sale finally came, Temple's main rival turned out to be another London dealer, Sam Fogg, who like Temple arranged for an agent to bid for him by telephone. The bidding went to almost fifteen times the estimate, but at 85,000 euros Fogg dropped out. The two men happened to be at the same party that evening when Temple received a call to tell him that he had been successful: 'I was so excited that I nearly fell over.'

Temple knew that he had got a bargain, but given the lack of an established market for such an object, it took him some time to work out a more realistic value. The figure he came up with was 1.5 million euros, though he now believes this to be well short of the mark: ‘It’s of a rarity you can’t exaggerate, so it’s probably worth two or three times that, if not ten times.’

His immediate thought was to offer the picture to the Louvre, partly because it owned a comparable icon, and partly because he presumed that the head of the relevant department, Marie-Hélène Rutschowscaya, would have the power to veto an overseas sale. When he did so, he was amazed to discover that a member of her department had been present at the auction, but had inexplicably failed to bid for the icon. This person had then compounded their mistake by not exercising the Louvre’s *droit de préemption* – its right under French law to buy any object from a successful bidder for the sum he or she has just paid for it.

There followed a long and frustrating wait while Mme Rutschowscaya attempted to persuade her superiors to meet the now enormously higher price. When Temple finally received an answer, it was a no.

So, in February of this year, he asked France’s oldest-established art shippers, André Chenue, to transport the icon to England for him. He also asked them to handle the necessary paperwork. In response, he was told that since it was a painting on canvas or cloth which had been bought for less than 150,000 euros, no export licence was necessary. He asked them to double check, and got the same reply.

Once the icon was safely in London, Temple handed it to Laurence Morrocco – the only restorer he trusted – to be cleaned. It was an exceptionally difficult task, since the sixth-century artist had used encaustic

(pigments mixed with hot wax) rather than the egg tempera which later became the norm. But in the end, says Temple, ‘It cleaned like a dream.’

Encouraged by this, he again offered the icon to the Louvre, which again refused to meet his price. In the meantime, however, the British Museum declared an interest. It would be happy to pay £1 million, provided it could get a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Temple agreed to reserve the picture while the museum tried to raise the money.

Temple planned to unveil the restored icon at the Grosvenor House Fair in mid-June. But, as he discovered when he sent out the invitations to the event, the French authorities had a shock in store for him. The icon, they informed him, was not a painting but an ‘archaeological object’. As such, it *did* need an export licence, and must be returned to France while he applied for one.

Temple was bewildered. As he wrote in reply, ‘According to the *notice explicatif* the French Museums Department gives to exporters, an archaeological object is something discovered under the ground or under the sea, or which comes from an archaeological site or collection. This painting doesn’t match any of those criteria.’

In the meantime, two new potential buyers had emerged: the Cleveland Museum in America, and a man whom Temple will identify only as ‘one of the greatest private collectors in the world’. The collector began to exert ‘intense pressure’ on Temple to sell to him, and when told that the British Museum had first refusal, proposed a compromise: he would buy the icon but give it to the museum on an extended loan.

‘The British Museum was delighted,’ says Temple, ‘because to raise that kind of money is extremely difficult, and they were afraid that the Heritage Lottery Fund would see the icon as “élitist”.’ In August the collector duly paid £1 million for the icon.

But though Temple believed that the sale was 'an elegant solution' to the situation, he had reckoned without the obstinacy of French bureaucrats. Ignoring his arguments, they continued to insist that the icon was an archaeological object, and that he must travel to France, taking it with him, to sign a document acknowledging the fact. The British Museum, for its part, regretfully decided that it was unable to exhibit the picture until the legal problems were sorted out.

The icon's new owner, according to Temple, was convinced that the Louvre was preparing a trap: if he were to acknowledge the icon's 'archaeological' status, it would immediately be seized by the French authorities. 'He told me of a painting by Chardin that someone wanted to export,' says Temple. 'The French Museums Department said it was fine, but then tipped off the director of the Lille Museum, and it ended up there instead.'

When contacted by *The Sunday Times Magazine*, the French Ministry of Culture denied that there was anything to worry about. 'Our position is very clear,' said its spokesman Robert Fohr. 'It is simply a matter of regularising the situation for administrative purposes. There is no risk to Mr Temple.' He confirmed that the icon must be returned to French soil, but later rang back to say that this was a mistake: all that was needed was to sign the relevant documents.

For the icon's owner, however, this is still not good enough. 'He's a man of strong opinions, and he won't hear of doing it that way,' says Richard Temple. 'He believes that as soon as they have a signature, they'll start pursuing me through the courts.' So the Virgin and Child's fate hangs in the balance until one side or the other backs down.

In his essay *Icons and Their Meaning Today*, Canon A.M. Allchin observes that one of the great attractions of such paintings is their sense of

harmony – ‘a harmony of heaven and earth, time and eternity, spirit and matter, which seems to elude us, yet at times is given us to us if we are ready to receive it.’ Twelve hundred years after the Iconoclasts were finally pacified, British art-lovers can only hope that a drop of that harmony will trickle its way into the stony heart of the French Civil Service.